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Untapping Europe's entrepreneurial potential

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Thank you Mr Chairman.

Let me also thank the President of EUROCHAMBRES, Mr Leitl, and the President of Unioncamere, Mr Sangalli, for their kind invitation.

My name is Umberto Lonardoni. I am Director General at I.F.O.A. – Istituto Formazione Operatori Aziendali, We are a private, not-for-profit Training and Employment Agency born from the Chambers of Commerce in the early Seventies: a combination that allows us to offer paths for growth through training, professionalization and employment programs. Our local, regional and national Chambers sit in our Board. With fourteen sites all over Italy, a twenty million Euro turnover in two thousand eighteen, about two hundred full time equivalent employees, over thirty-one thousand trainees and eighty-seven percent successful placement rate, we work to maintain and strengthen the link between people and companies: we define ourselves as a real bridge that people can travel to reach the labour market.

Founders and Head Office of Ulixes, a European Economic Interest Grouping gathering organisations similar to us throughout the European Union, we have been active at the European and international level for over twenty-five years, driven by the will of transferring “useful knowledge” –this is our motto– to people, businesses and territories.

Now, to today's topic. “Untapping” entrepreneurship implies that something is tapping it. Taps could be bureaucracy, lack of support, fear to fail, insufficient information or financing or support, and many other factors. Nevertheless, I would like to highlight here two main points that, in my opinion and experience, are often underestimated.

You know, IFOA comes from a town, Reggio Emilia, and a territory, Region Emilia Romagna, where entrepreneurship deepens its roots into history, and not by chance. Industries, originally large industries, were able to act as mentors and somehow incubators for young people with new, brilliant ideas. At the same time, technical and vocational schools were born, able to provide industries with “semi-finished” human resources, where “semi-finished” means “ready to support the development of manufacturing processes and entrepreneurial pathways”. This is not simply a heritage from the past. Even today, enterprises flourish where territories and local infrastructures support them, and where large industries are able to set and develop fruitful relationships with local small entrepreneurs, with schools, training centres, public authorities and communities, producing employment and wealth to the benefit of everyone. In our Region, please consider the so-called “motor valley”, where world leading automotive industries were born and thrive (I could quote Ferrari, or Lamborghini, or Ducati or Dallara), thanks to an entrepreneur's talent plus their deep links with the local context.

So, my first input is: entrepreneurship is not a single person's effort, rather the result of cultural processing of a territory.

Second point. Entrepreneurship is not just adding competences to people of good will, neither is just the ability start-up a business. We ask our sons and daughters to give birth to new enterprises, but over the last 15 years we also tell them that the world is a bad place to live, that they will be the first living worse than their fathers

did, that “it is impossible for you to succeed”, and so on. We give them a negative outlook on the future, and ask them to take risks! We should turn that bad habit upside-down. It is not by chance that the European Union pointed out “the vision” as one of the fifteen key competences for an entrepreneur. In the EntreComp document¹, the vision is seen as the ability to “imagine the future” and “visualize future scenarios for guiding efforts and actions”. Obviously, thinking of vision as a competence means that it can be forged and built through cultural and vocational training pathways, aimed at developing the technical ability of “handling the reality” on the one side, and the cultural capacity of “looking at reality with new eyes”, on the other.

In fact, this is a cultural issue from my point of view, rather than a technical one, involving soft skills at least as much as technical ones. And involving the vision of the future that we, as adults, have. Being an entrepreneur is more than being able to start-up something, it implies “being intrinsically entrepreneurial”.

Therefore, my second input is: we should give young people, we should give potential entrepreneurs, we should give all people a positive, “generative vision” of the future. “Generativity” should come even before “Entrepreneurship”.

True it is that, sticking to data, the overall situation is quite complex: for example, the two thousand nineteen Country Report for Italy highlights a number of external factors not contributing to untapping the entrepreneurial development: high political uncertainty, heavy bureaucracy in public administration, inadequate levels of and investments in innovation. Clearly, if we simply stay with these data, the passion for new adventures and the positive and curious glance over the future quickly faint, and the will of putting one’s talent and potential into the game.

How can we change this?

Well, in my vision an entrepreneur is not a single person, standing alone against adversity; an entrepreneur is not a white elephant. **Entrepreneurs live in an environment and a context.** At the same time, one cannot teach positivity by words, rather by proof, by disseminating and putting into value successful experiences. So, **offering a young entrepreneur the chance to meet elder entrepreneurs could be good, for the former needs to learn and the latter should better rise their heads from their possibly old machinery** (that is actually what the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs aims at, or, more generally speaking, mobility). In other words, I wonder if reciprocity, that is, creating shared and innovative visions of the future among youth and adults, could be a key.

One more thought regards the role of the Chambers in all that. Who, if not the Chambers, should identify and certify companies able to support this generative entrepreneurial process? Who could better find and mainstream successful experiences? Who else is in the position to bring together companies, public institutions, education and training onto a common playground, based on a broad and deep understanding of the European and global markets?

On this topic, let me mention the experiences we are carrying out with the Chamber system, both at Italian and international level. Paying special attention to training programmes at EQF level 5 (in Italy they are called ITS, Istituti Tecnici Superiori, that is Higher Technical Institutes), who are a great hub between individual development, technical skills, soft skills and the labour market needs, **IFOA has been encouraging for a long time young people to International Mobility, with the aim of increasing self-entrepreneurship.** We do that through internships abroad, with our continuous participation in Erasmus and Erasmus+, EURES and the Erasmus for young entrepreneurs. This work has also set the concrete basis for us to promote, win and then implement a project still unique of its kind, **ROI-MOB**, aimed to study the return on investment on European Mobility.

Thanks to this favourable environment, on a regular basis we offer training courses to support young and adult participants in business start-up and we deliver specific training for innovative start-ups, in a Regional ecosystem that promotes networks among incubators, hubs, Universities.

¹ cfr. JRC Science for policy report, EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, 2016.

More recently, **with Unioncamere Nazionale we are involved in an important project of the Ministry of Labour, the Observatory on migrant entrepreneurship - which aims to offer training and consultancy services to migrant citizens interested in running their own business.** Again, the European dimension backs us up: with project **ENTRYWAY - Entrepreneurs without borders**, financed by the Directorate General for the Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) we developed a free training and consultancy program, targeted to non-EU citizens, which aims to facilitate business creation (and the leader of this project is Formaper, who is here with us ...).

Again at the level of the National Chamber system, I would like to mention Crescere Imprenditori (growing entrepreneurs), financed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, as part of the Youth Guarantee Program: free training and support for business start-up: participants are NEETs aged from eighteen to twenty nine, with entrepreneurial attitudes. In close collaboration with Unioncamere, Invitalia, and the Chambers of Commerce, two hundred and fifty courses were held. At the end of the course, the participants could complete their business plan and present their request for access to a loan from Invitalia.

I close. In our entrance hall, at IFOA, we have a sentence by a great ancient Greek comedian, Aristophanes: "Training people is not like filling a vase. Rather, it is like lighting a fire". Let me wish all of us the wisdom and patience to be able to light and keep alive the fire of entrepreneurship.

Thank you for your attention.